EXPRESSIONISM

Like so many artistic movements within the larger umbrella of "early modernism," Expressionism is always much easier to identify when we see or hear it, as opposed to finding a universal definition on which we all can agree. Even though we might not be able to put our thumb on or describe exactly what we're experiencing, Expressionism has a tendency to grab our attention aggressively, sometimes mercilessly, when we look upon, say, Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, watch Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or attend a production of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*.

The elusive yet controversial features of Expressionism are characterized by what art historian Dietmar Elger calls the multitude of counter-worlds created by individual artists. In other words, Expressionists attempted to create utopias as a means to confront the rapid modernization of the world and the alienation it caused in its wake. Therefore, a lot of Expressionist art may strike us as unsettling because it expresses how its creators contended with the psychological effects of alienation: fear, anxiety, vivid dreams and nightmares, conflict, and dark truths hidden within the depths of our subconscious minds. Expressionist art balances a precarious tension between the wish for utopia and the grim components of reality, governed by the mission of individual artists to transcend or emancipate themselves from the gloom of their historical conditions. That's why it's easy to spot Expressionism but sometimes difficult to articulate it - artists come to terms with this tension through intensely personal ways.

For instance, this description explains in part why Schoenberg and his contemporaries regarded the "Emancipation of Dissonance" - the death blow to the near three-century hegemony of common-practice tonality - as an inexorable, moral imperative. More importantly, however, this description helps us understand why Expressionists have a way of bubbling conflict to the brim of their artistic media: in addition to dealing with the rapid, anxiety-inducing modernization of society, artists shortly thereafter had to reconcile themselves to the devastating effects of World War I. If artists regarded the Western world of the early 1900s as moving too fast and too dramatically as to slip through their fingers like water, then they could escape to the world of their craft, work out and express their anxieties, and create a world undefined by alienation and war.

MAHLER: Im Abendrot (Adagietto from Symphony No. 5, arr. Clytus Gottwald)

The sumptuous sonorities and sweeping phrases of Gustav Mahler's famous "Adagietto" from his *Symphony No. 5* find their poetic counterpoint in Joseph von Eichendorff's "In the Glow of Evening." The choral arrangement of the symphony movement elevates the poem's allegorical images of love between a couple in the twilight of life - as if we are listening to the peaceful resignation of a sunset.

WEBERN: *Entflieht Auf leichten Kähnen,* Op. 2

Anton Weber composed his first choral work *Flee in Light Boats* in 1908, while completing his doctorate in musicology. The piece reveals Webern's devotion to several models. The poetry of Stefan George was among the composer's favorites. The harmonic vocabulary of the piece, which lies at the threshold of dodecaphonic techniques, reveals the teachings of Webern's mentor Schoenberg. Finally, the chorus is a *tour de force* of strict double canon, a consequence of his studying the music of Renaissance master Heinrich Isaac.

BERG: Die Nachtigall (arr. Clytus Gottwald)

Alban Berg's playful yet majestic "The Nightingale" lists as the third of his *Seven Early Songs*. Adapted from a poem by Theodore Storm, "The Nightingale" analogously captures the marvelous transition between the consonant but tonal ambiguity of Berg's early works and the lush, fully atonal world of his later works. Both sound worlds manifest two towering figures figures in Berg's compositional life, respectively Brahms and Schoenberg.

SCHOENBERG: *Friede auf Erden*

One of the choral hallmarks of early Modernism and of the twentieth century, Arnold Schoenberg's *Peace on Earth* captures the drama of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's Christmas poem. In it Schoenberg incorporates an expanded tonal vocabulary right at the cusp of his transformation to atonality. The result is a richly sonorous and complex "illusion for mixed choir," the words the composer himself used after reflecting on his wish for unity after devastating effects of World War I.

LANG: By Fire

Pulitzer Prise winning composer David Lang has received critical acclaim for having one of the most individual voices in contemporary classical music. In his 1984 choral work *By Fire,* Lang overlays two texts: a libretto by Robert Scheer depicting a CIA nuclear test on birds and excerpts from the twelfth chapter of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, "Attacking with Fire." Scored for mixed chorus and Soprano and Bass soloists, Lang analogizes the simultaneous declamation of two texts by overlaying repeated vocal melodies within the chorus and soloists. In other words, the drama of the text emerges through the combining and doubling of vocal lines.

DALLAPICCOLA: Tempus destruendi–Tempus aedificandi

Luigi Dallapiccola's penultimate and arguably most difficult choral work, *Time to Destroy - Time to Build*, brings to life two medieval texts. The first, *Ploratus* (*Lamentation*), describes the siege and destruction of the Jewish Temple by Rome in A.D. 70. The second, *Exhortatio (Exhortation)*, treats the attempt to rebuild the Temple. Dallapiccola's tightly organized and constructed music captures both the severity and the austerity of these contrasting but complementary texts.

POULENC: *Figure humaine*

Francis Poulenc wished for the score of the cantata for double chorus, *The Face of Man* (1943), to be published in secret and premiered at the moment of liberation from Nazi occupation. Moreover, he set the music to Paul Éluard's 1942 *Poésie et vérité,* a work bound to themes of liberation. While Poulenc's plan never came to fruition, he considered the piece his most powerful choral work to date - the composer even placed the score on a music stand under a French flag the day the Allied Forces entered France. The cantata received its premiere in England on 24 March 1945 on a BBC Broadcast.